

SERMONS

BY THE

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SERMON I.

THE IMPORTANCE AND DIFFICULTIES OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY.

PREACHED AT CLAPHAM, ON HIS INDUCTION.

1 COR. ii. 3.

I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

ST. PAUL had been educated in the learning, and instructed in all the religious knowledge, of the age in which he lived. He belonged to the strictest sect of his religion; had been from his youth blameless in his moral conduct; was converted to the Christian faith by a special revelation of Christ, and appointed by him to be a chosen vessel to bear his name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. In knowledge of the Gospel, and success in preaching it; in love to Christ, and sufferings for his sake; in spiritual gifts, and the abundance of revelations, he was “not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostle.” Nevertheless, he observes to his Corinthian disciples, that when he first came to them, it was “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” If such were his feelings, what should be mine!

I am well aware of the caution which is necessary in applying to ourselves any expressions of the Sacred Writers. Without a guarded attention to the circumstances in which they stood, there is great danger of employing their words in such a manner as to sanction our own ignorance or presumption. But the text expresses, so exactly, and so feelingly, the sentiments with which I now address you, that I trust I shall stand excused before God and you for my adoption of them.

The language which the Apostle used implies a distressing sense of inability rightly to discharge the duties of his office, and a painful fear lest he should be found wanting. I shall consider the causes which must produce in every Christian Minister the same apprehension. They may be reduced to three principal considerations:—

- I. The importance of the trust reposed in him;
- II. The difficulty of the service itself; and,
- III. The aggravation of that difficulty produced by his own infirmity and corruption.

I. The IMPORTANCE of the trust reposed in every Minister may be inferred both from *the good effects produced by a due discharge of his sacred office, and from the evil consequences of a negligent discharge of it.* Let us consider these effects, first, in their most extensive operation.

It requires but little attention to perceive that a very close connection subsists between the character of a Nation and that of the Ministers by whom it is instructed. Are they pure in their doctrines, holy and exemplary in their lives, diligent in the discharge of their duties, and impressed with a deep sense of the weight of spiritual and eternal things? The national character will, under the Divine blessing, be in a measure conformed to theirs, and will take the impress of their virtues. Let them, on the contrary, degenerate, and become earthly-minded, sensual, and corrupt: the fountains being thus polluted, the streams will almost inevitably become impure also. And that which takes place in a nation will be found to hold in a parish. Due allowance being made in this, as in every other instance, for the restraining effect of other causes; the spirit of a Minister will generally be infused into his Congregation. They will rarely be zealous in religion while he is lukewarm, or altogether careless in the service of God while he is active in it.

But, to view the subject in a narrower compass, let us observe the effect which the instructions of the Preacher may have on Individuals. —The Gospel is the great remedy supplied by God for the disorders introduced into the world by sin; and the dispensing of this remedy is intrusted to his Ministers. They are the stewards of his mysteries, the shepherds of his flock, and labourers together with God. He has chosen to commit the treasure of his Gospel to “earthen vessels.” He communicates to men spiritual health by the hand of their fellow-sinners, in the same manner as he healed the sick by the hands of his Apostles and Prophets. Wherever, therefore, his Gospel is faithfully delivered, his blessing may be expected to attend it. The sinner will be awakened, grace will be imparted, faith will be strengthened, and hope enlivened. The fruits of love to God, and of cheerful obedience to his law, will be produced; and a spirit of benevolence and charity to man will be diffused. These, even if estimated as referring to this life only, are important benefits; but they become invaluable when referred to eternity. They constitute the purest and most perfect happiness of this world, and are the earnest of glory in the next. But to point out the value of these blessings, is to show not only the importance of the office of the Minister, by whom they are dispensed, but His responsibility and his danger. Let him ponder upon eternity,

let him estimate the value of the soul and the worth of spiritual blessings, and he cannot enter upon his sacred office without fear and trembling.

But, weighty as is this consideration, there is another which appears to me not inferior to it, in estimating the importance of the trust reposed in a Christian Minister: *The honour of, and the glory of his Gospel, are intrusted to him.*—It has pleased God to ordain, that the preaching of the Gospel shall be the chief instrument by which the name of Christ shall be made known, and his glory celebrated. Does the Minister of the Gospel duly dwell upon the power and grace of Christ, upon the dignity of his person, and the merit of his death? These glorious subjects will be understood; Christ will be honoured and obeyed; the influence of the Spirit will be sought; God will be worshipped through the Mediator, and will receive the fresh tribute of praise for his mercy in the work of Redemption. It is true, that by the reading of the Bible, as well as by preaching, the same knowledge may be attained, and the same effects produced: but whatever influence private reading may have upon some individuals, the great mass of society must necessarily either learn the Gospel of Christ from preaching, or not know it at all.

It is remarkable, that although the word of God was already in the hands of the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Spirit of God brought an Apostle from a distant part of Judea to communicate, through his means, the knowledge of Christ;—a sufficient proof that it is agreeable to the economy of Divine Wisdom to make use of the agency of Ministers for imparting the blessings of the Gospel. But what is man, or the best and ablest of men, that he should be thus put in trust, as it were, with the glory of Him who sitteth above all, the Lord of heaven and earth? Well may he, to whom this solemn charge is intrusted, enter upon it in “weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.”

Should anyone be inclined to think that I too much magnify my office, let him reflect upon the *responsibility* annexed to it.—There is little to be envied, when the post of pre-eminence is the post of extreme danger: for, if God has intrusted us with a great charge, he will demand of us a solemn account of the manner in which we have executed it. Where “much is given, much will be required.” If the Minister, who is sent to be the pattern and guide of the flock, be negligent or unfaithful, his guilt is great, and his punishment will be severe.

These are the words of the Lord to Ezekiel, and they are applicable to every Minister:—“Son of man! I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked

way to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at *thine hand*.” Again: “When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumbling-block before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand.” And is it thus with every watchman of God, that he shall not only answer for his own sins, but for those of the flock committed to his care, if he warn them not, nor lead them in the right way? Alas! who can enter upon such a charge without fear and trembling?

II. If the importance of the work of the Ministry must produce a sense of weakness and fear, these emotions will be exceedingly increased if we add the consideration of its DIFFICULTY.

It is a difficult service in its own nature. Were the work of a preacher indeed confined to the delivery of a moral discourse, this would not be an arduous task. But a Minister of the Gospel has much more to do. He will endeavour, under Divine Grace, to bring every individual in his congregation to live no longer to himself, but unto Him who died for us. But here the passions, the prejudices, and perhaps the temporal interests of men combine to oppose his success. It is not easy to obtain any influence over the mind of another; but to obtain such an influence as to direct it contrary to the natural current of its desires and passions, is a work of the highest difficulty. Yet such is the work of a Minister. He has to arrest the sinner in his course of sin; to shake his stronghold of security; to make the stouthearted tremble under the denunciation of God’s judgment; to lead him so to deny himself, as to sacrifice the inclinations most dear to him—to repent, and become a new creature. Neither is the work of the Ministry less arduous in respect to those who are not open and profligate sinners. Self-love, the most powerful passion of the human breast, will render it equally difficult to convince the formalist of the unsoundness of his religion, the pharisee of the pride of his heart, and the mere moralist of his deficiency in the sight of God. In all these cases, we have to convey unpleasant tidings; to persuade to what is disagreeable; to effect not only a reformation in the conduct of men, and a regulation of their passions, but, what is of still higher difficulty, a change in their good opinion of themselves. Nay, further, we have not merely to “wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” “Who is sufficient for these things?”

III. When a Minister, deeply impressed with the importance and difficulty of his work, looks into his own heart, to explore the resources with which he is furnished for so difficult a service; there, alas! he meets with little that does not serve to increase his sense of weakness, and to confirm his fears. For it must be remembered, that he is a man of like passions with his flock, inheriting a body of corruption; that he is, perhaps, deficient in ability, perhaps unfortunate in the natural constitution of his mind; that, at all events, he has to struggle with infirmities, is exposed to temptations, has more to accomplish than others, as well as greater difficulties to surmount; and that, whilst more will be expected from him, in himself he may have no resources above those of any of his congregation.

Suffer me to enumerate some particulars, which my own feelings suggest as likely to produce an affecting sense of weakness in every Christian Pastor.

A want of wisdom and spiritual understanding, is one of the first things which presents itself.—When the question is proposed, Will you undertake to be the instructor of a congregation in matters of the greatest import; who would not tremble to answer in the affirmative? Consider the various errors which have distracted the religious world; reflect upon the dangerous consequences of error in the way of salvation. Can you hope to discover the way of truth? Can you presume to be the guide of others? To such questions a Minister will reply, by entreating his congregation to join their prayers with his, that the Spirit of Truth may lead him into the knowledge of “the truth as it is in Jesus.”

A want of ability in the mode of communicating religious instruction, is another subject of anxiety to a Minister.—There is great danger lest a good cause should suffer by the inefficient or imprudent mode in which it is maintained. An uninteresting manner or an indiscreet zeal, too great laxity or unnecessary severity, may be equally hurtful. When the awful judgments of God are to be denounced, it requires much caution to combine, with manifest hatred of the sin, tenderness to the sinner. There is a limit, not easily to be found, where reproof tends to exasperate, rather than to amend; where it ceases to promote reformation, and begins to provoke resistance.

A good intention will, however, do much to prevent the bad consequences which may arise from want of wisdom or ability. But there is another weakness, more pernicious in its consequences: I mean, *a want of courage*.—To “fight the good fight of faith;” to speak honestly and openly; to rebuke vice wheresoever it appears; to incur displeasure rather than spare a prevail-

ing error; to assert the cause of God in the face of licentiousness and infidelity; perhaps to suffer in reputation, to be misrepresented, to be exposed to ridicule (and to these trials both Ministers and the Master of Ministers have been called);—these things require no little courage. St. Paul entreats the Ephesian disciples to pray, that even he might be enabled to “speak boldly, as he ought to speak.”

But, alas! want of courage is but one weakness out of many, which spring from the fruitful source of the corruption of the nature of man. This corruption itself it is which is calculated to bring the Minister before his people in “weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” If he asks his own heart, Where is the ardent love to Christ, the compassion for perishing sinners, the delight in the service of God, which are the qualifications of a faithful pastor? Where the purity of heart, the meekness, the humility, the heavenly mindedness, the fervent piety, which should adorn the example of the flock? Such questions impress him with a sense of something more than “weakness;” and lead him to “fear and tremble,” lest, by his conduct, he should injure rather than assist the holy cause of which he is the advocate.

The account which I have given of the weakness of a Christian Minister is indeed very humiliating: yet there is a point of view in which the contemplation even of this weakness may serve at the same time to encourage man and to glorify God. When the Lord had said to St. Paul, “My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness,” the Apostle at once founded this conclusion upon the review of his infirmities; “Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me; for, when I am weak, then am I strong.” And the same language may every Christian Pastor humbly adopt. His “strength is indeed perfect weakness,” but he may be strong in Christ Jesus. Christ has promised to be with his Ministers “always, even unto the end of the world.” Encouraged by this gracious declaration, I would trust that the word spoken in great “weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling,” may yet be made effectual, by the power of Christ, to “pull down the strong holds of sin and satan.”

I have now briefly stated the causes which ought to produce, in every Christian Minister, a sense of weakness and an impression of fear. It will not, I trust, be thought foreign to my subject, to apply what has been said of the duties of the Minister to the practice of his Hearers.

If he, then, is impressed with awe, from a sense of the worth of their souls, ought not they also to consider their inestimable value? Ought they

not to reflect seriously upon the importance of their eternal happiness; and to weigh all that relates to their salvation with attention, with impartiality, and with a wish rather to profit by what is said than to criticise the mode of saying it? If, again, the glory of Christ fill the Minister with a consciousness of utter inability to sustain the character of His steward or ambassador; should not the majesty and power of the Master induce you to respect His words, and the doctrines drawn from them, though conveyed by the medium of a feeble and unprofitable servant? If, also, the strict account he will be required to give of his ministry, induce him to labour that he may discharge it faithfully; shall not the sincerity of his intention, and the awfulness of his responsibility, excuse the freedom of his admonitions? And is it not of moment to consider, that it is not he alone who shall render an account of his conduct; and that if the preacher be responsible for his preaching, the hearer must, in an equal degree, be responsible for his hearing?—Again; if the minister is in danger of sinking under the impression of his own weakness and incapacity, is it not the duty of the congregation to interpret both his words and actions with candour and charitable allowance? Ought they not to reflect, that a weak and unworthy messenger may faithfully and honestly convey a most important message? Ought they not to weigh impartially, and without prejudice, the doctrines which derive their sole authority from God’s written word, although delivered by one neither possessed of any authority in his own person, nor indeed ambitious of it? Ought they not to afford him encouragement, not only by a patient hearing of his counsel, but by that best and most animating reward—a ready compliance with it in their practice?

Finally, my brethren, let me entreat of you, that which indeed might have been added to your duties, to join with me in earnest prayer to God, that He who “giveth eyes to the blind and feet to the lame,” may preserve me from faltering or fainting in my Christian course; that He, who ordaineth strength of praise even out of the mouth of babes, may enlighten me by his heavenly wisdom, encourage me by his strength, and sanctify me for his service by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit; that he may look down with mercy on my weak and defective services, and so bless the seed of the word sown among you, that it may bring forth a fruitful harvest of righteousness and true holiness; and that thus we may together render up a clear and acceptable account to the great Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ: to whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, &c. &c.